

Remembering The Grafter's Shack

By Lake Puett

Our father, Garnett G. Puett, Jr., was a third generation beekeeper by trade. We lived blissfully in Hahira, Georgia, a very small town, where daddy bred and sold queen bees, package bees, and bee supplies. He was one of a handful of beekeepers or scientists around the world who knew how to breed queens by artificial insemination. The strange contraption he used for this practice was always on top of our Turkey Red piano. He died suddenly in 1971.

Honeybees are in our blood. Our brother, Garnett III, is a honey producer and a sculptor, using bees as his assistants. His wife, Whendi, makes dipped beeswax candles. Our sister Barry, a lawyer, worked for five years as a beekeeper and bee grafter in Brazil, selling all parts of the bee's effort, the pollen, the honey, the royal jelly (which the bees feed to their brood). Before that, she worked at different times in the family's queen business.

Morgan, our other sister, an artist/fashion designer, drenches things in beeswax and uses bees as her trademark. I don't do much with bees, other than make beeswax candles, but my husband, Rod Davis, had a few hives that for years were plagued by bears, which is why he finally gave up that hobby. After daddy died, our mother, Judy, married another beekeeper, Jim Powers, this time a honey producer. At one time, he was the largest honey produced in the world.

We were brought up to think of beekeeping as romantic, which may be because we had a writer for a father and an artist for a mother. There were other beekeepers in the world, but they thought of the keeping of bees as a trade, like anything else one does to make a living, and probably did not romanticize it the way we did.

We always had an active beehive in our yard in South Georgia. There are lots of flowers – azaleas, daylilies, camellias, honeysuckle, and wisteria, among others – in the South to keep a hive busy. I can remember taking the lid off the hive to impress my friends. The smell of a beehive still lives in my nose. Another scent that is even stronger is one found in a honey house or bee supply barn. The aroma of hot beeswax and honey will probably be in my head until the day I die.

On Saturdays, sometimes, Daddy would take us down to his “shop” to get us out of our mother's way. He would push us around on a dolly and let us play in the woodworking supplies he kept for those beekeepers who needed to buy supers (the wooden boxes used as components of beehives), nails, hive tools, and other such things. I remember being fascinated with the huge boxes of loose nails and the towering stacks of hive bodies, all in boxes.

There was a queen yard outside Hahira on Highway 41 with row after row of beehives, all surrounding a grafting shack. The queen bees were bred in the shack and then placed in small hives called nuclei. (In order to run smoothly, each hive must have a queen.) The grafting supplies were also kept there.

In his shop, on the other side of town, Daddy would make, or have someone make, small, screened boxes that were filled with bees and mailed to other beekeepers, usually honey producers. These package bees were then emptied into hives. Each package also had a queen. The queen would live for a short time in another tiny cage, the queen cage. The queen cage, about three inches long and an inch wide, would be suspended in the package or hive so that the bees could get to know her before she and a few other bees that were her companions ate through their food source and entered the hive as permanent residents.

In the spring of 1968, when the bee season was particularly busy, we all worked at the shop after school making queen cages for daddy. This was probably the first money any of us would earn. Barry, then 13, would make the candy-like bee food that would feed the queen and about six other bees in each queen cage. The bee food was a mixture of a sugary powder and corn syrup. She would roll out the candy like dough, into small "sausages," and feel each cage. Morgan, then 11, and I, 15, would take turns putting a tiny piece of cellophane on top of the candy, then a screen on top of the entire cage. Mama would use a small stapler to tack down the end of the screen. Garnett, then 9, would put a small cork into the candy end of the cage. (He would also, in his spare time, place about ten beeswax cells on a board for later use in the grafting shack. These cells would house the baby queens daddy would make and later, when they were mature enough, sell.) Daddy would mark the queen bee and slip her and a few worker bees and drones through a small hole in the other end of the cage and close it off with another cork. These queen cages could be strapped with a mailing label and mailed like any ordinary package. This "cottage industry" would last several years. Morgan and Garnett even remember making the queen cages on our back porch.

I worked in Daddy's office after school and on weekends during my last two years of high school. My job was to type invoices and file everything. Working with Louise Passmore, who ran the office, I was able to learn a great deal about the bee business, but more about Daddy. He had two desks. He would use one until it got too messy, then he would move to the other, and it was then Louise could clean off the first desk. It was at one of those desks that I found a file of Daddy's short stories.

It was the grafter's shack in the woods out on Highway 41 that holds the strongest memory. It stood with great dignity in the middle of many rows of white beehives, under the protection of an army of very tall pines.

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